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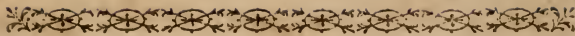
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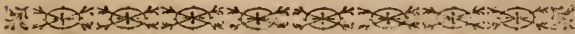
OF

PROVIDENCE, R. I.

22 Dec. 1883.



Mr. BENTLEY'S SERMON.





11624

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S E R M O N,

PREACHED

AT THE STONE CHAPEL

IN

B O S T O N,

SEPTEMBER 12, 1790.



BY

WILLIAM BENTLEY, A.M.

PASTOR of the Second Congregational Church in
S A L E M.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE HEARERS.

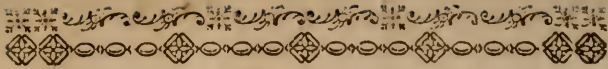
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S E R M O N.



MATTHEW VII. 21.

NOT EVERY ONE THAT SAITH UNTO ME, LORD,
LORD, SHALL ENTER INTO THE KINGDOM OF
HEAVEN; BUT HE THAT DOETH THE WILL OF
MY FATHER, WHO IS IN HEAVEN.

THE ingenuous simplicity, which re-
commends the doctrines and precepts
of Jesus Christ, forms a very pleasing
evidence of his design to reform the world.
Should an impartial stranger consider the histo-
ry of his religion at its most favorable periods,
he could hardly imagine that it had so pure an
origin; that the language of condescension,
and the simple precepts of life, inspired by an
hope of immortality, could produce various and
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contending sects, who had lost all affection for each other, had neglected the best virtues of life, and had built their hopes of glory on zeal and contention. Still the melancholy proofs of such conduct have not prevented the belief, that nothing could be more benevolent than the character of Jesus Christ. Every thing kind flowed from his lips. He was born in humble life, and never rose in his distinctions beyond what humble life could suggest and comprehend. Affection was recommended in every discourse; points never debated with passion; the history of his religion, so offensive to his countrymen, intimated in parables; and every idea of limited design excluded from his heart. Is it not time to recur to the instructions of this wise friend of mankind, and to accept them uncorrupted by traditions, creeds or councils? Should a preacher appear in this assembly, of venerable piety, of simple manners, and with all the marks of humble birth, and declare, as the introduction to his religious service, a zeal for the most important moral truths, and declare that by their fruits

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men should be known ; and to our text should he subjoin, Many will say to me, Lord, Lord, have we not prophecied in thy name, and in thy name done many wonderful works, and then I will profess to them, I never knew you ; and should he close with the memorable words which represented only those who obeyed his precepts as founded on a rock ; could you suppose his design mysterious, or his doctrine partial, or illiberal ? Judge ye then of yourselves, what is right.

Let us then, in the consideration of the text, endeavour to obtain the most obvious sense of the several expressions, that we may be sure of the general sentiment they contain.

What could he have intended, in saying, that many would say, Lord, Lord ? The words subjoined, very fully explain the intention. He that doth the will of my Father, shall be preferred. And the pretensions of such persons are cited in the next verse, in which the exercise of even supernatural powers is considered as in itself unavailing. We have corresponding expressions

preffions in Paul, who confidered diftinctly, all the evident endowments, of which the mind is capable, both miraculous and natural, and declared them infufficient without charity, which he defined to be practical godlinefs, to deferve the christian character. They then, who cry, Lord, Lord, are they who do not obey the gofpel, how far fo ever they may go in pretentions of affection for it. Though they hold the firft ranks, and the firft gifts in the church ; if they have the moft commanding eloquence in delivering truth to others, or the moft availing external fanctity, to gain them refpect and confidence : Yea, if God fhould even fupernaturally endue them for the moft noble ends of his providence ; yet, if they have not a right, moral temper, the whole fhall not avail to place them among the meaneft of thofe who have been obedient. What a check this is to the prefumptuous, to the uncharitable, to the hypocritical, and to the unfaithful ! Heaven and happinefs were not defigned by God as the exclusive rights of learned priefts, or ingenious docters ;

doctors ; they are the end which God has proposed for all mankind, and are therefore, by the same means, attainable by all men. Riches and honors cannot ensure the purchase ; neither can learning, pompous titles, respect nor dignity. Virtue alone is the moral happiness of the world, and personal virtue alone secures heaven. Let then priests declaim, this is sure, that the increase of virtue is the increase of happiness ; and whatever found may be made in this world, virtue alone will distinguish us in the next.

Having seen how our religious advantages may render us happy, by rendering us virtuous, let us, in the next place, inquire, what Jesus intended by doing the will of his Father. And he has so connected his discourse, that whatever sense may be applied to his words, in themselves considered, they here admit only one explanation. When he announces his last blessing, it is upon those who keep these sayings and do them ; and these sayings or precepts are the will

of God. As no new ritual is proposed, or doctrine which does not require action, something to be done, we may safely infer, that when he propounded his salvation to his countrymen, proposed his own rewards, upon doing the will of God, he intended his commandments. What the nature and extent of these commands were, he has determined by the preceding parts of his discourse; so that his rewards are offered to all who conformed to their conceptions of their moral obligations, and the foundation of his religion is placed in this disposition. For whatever consisted in belief, public profession, and zeal, they were supposed to perform, while the most important end of religion was neglected.

Such as were obedient, were of the kingdom of heaven. This expression very frequently occurs, and never when it may not in some sense apply to the history of Christianity. By some it has been thought to denote the commencement of a future state, but never is so necessarily limited

limited to this sense, as to prevent its general design to represent the progress of Christian truth in the world. When they, who do the will of God, are pronounced to be of the kingdom of heaven, it intends, that as to them, religion has its true and most acceptable effect: That the proper way to secure divine blessing, was to obey, to act most agreeably to our obligations, and from the best motives reason or revelation could furnish. This obedience depends on our habitual inclination, connected with reasonable pursuits after knowledge. The different capacities of men may admit degrees of virtue, but all are consistent with religious integrity.

From the sentiment of the text, it is then inferred, that all men are, and always have been, capable of salvation. For if no external advantages, or personal knowledge of a revelation, can avail, without an habitual disposition to obedience, and this obedience is to be judged by its fruits, then this disposition is preferred to
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all those advantages, in themselves considered. And as the will of God implies the obligations of his creatures to all moral duties ; so far as they are sensible of them, and conform, they do, in their measure, which is all that can be required, perform his will, the end proposed in the kingdom of God by Jesus Christ. This is an obvious doctrine of Jesus ; and perhaps the reason why any have been taught to overlook it, has been, that it favors not those comparative, if not exclusive advantages to which some pretend, as it certainly does not their hopes, who cry, Lord, Lord, with affected devotion, and for their accomplishments, real or pretended, would be thought better than others, without any just claims. When men can inform us of a more noble end in revelation, than to perfect the constitutions which God has given us, we may suspect our argument ; but when all the various opinions may accord with this end, in the judgments of their several advocates, we cannot be blamed for accepting the conclusion as free from their intricacies, or absurdities, as is possible.

possible. For while objects and powers are so admirably connected in the whole system, to make an abstruse religion, in order to introduce a distinction, which is internal; since the exclusive help attributed to the Christian religion makes no outward distinction in the moral world, and the effects of the different motives may account for all we see, is to affront the simplicity of the Christian faith. But by placing religion in sober action, we are able to see how all men are accountable for their respective advantages; and hereby we leave not God as a respecter of persons, and prevent not the equitable distribution of his favors. God, we all know, has variously bestowed his gifts upon the human race; in equal variety he may have bestowed his moral as his other benefits; but as neither are in their relations unequal, and both may have a worthy end, there is no injustice with him. Without such sentiments, our most evident conceptions of justice may be violated.

What evidence should we consider as sufficient to prove this to be a doctrine of the Christian

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tian religion? At the critical moment when this truth was to be declared, should an heathen, possessed of devout respect to heaven, and exemplary in his life, be declared acceptable to God, and revelation assist this true light with miraculous testimony, would it be conclusive? Can any evidence be better adapted? This we can produce, without any forced or critical construction, in positive terms. Peter was taught to call nothing unclean, because the Jews thought other nations without the favor of God. Cornelius, a Roman officer in the province, was, for his devotion and alms, accepted of God. He was not profelyted to the Jewish religion, because Peter says, it was unlawful to keep company with him. Yet upon this evidence Peter exclaims, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, for in every nation, he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him. Nor was this truth questioned in the disputes respecting the use of the Hebrew ritual. If evidence, in such circumstances, produces not conviction, arguments may be applied in vain. And what a generous
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idea does this truth give us of God ! He was the friend of Israel, that in the end he might advance a universal religion ; but for a distant good, he never disregarded a present benefit. He knew the capacity he had given, and the several means by which it might be improved. He knew the distance of our most pure conceptions from truth, in all its relations, and could easily pardon the little varieties in those opinions, which were, at best, imperfect. If he took care for ravens, how much more would he take care of mankind ! How much more acceptable is the honest devotion of an heathen, than the hypocrisy of a Christian ! How much more pure the charity of a savage, than the pulpit-anathemas of a priest against churches which differ from his own. Blush, O Christian, that thy illiberal heart can call thy God to justify thy insolent attacks on other men, and fear lest thy fate, more miserable than their own, teach thee, with sorrow, to renounce the execrable idea.

And what may we infer more readily from this truth, than that the natural advantages of
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men constitute their only probation? Their gratitude is to arise from blessing they do really receive, their only devotion from the glory they behold, and their only obedience from the obligations they perceive. And do not our minds revolt, at the first reflection, on any other constitution? Let misery, in any degree, be increased by the guilt of men, that they should not rise beyond the strength of their powers in such state, is curse enough. But to superadd a gift which man has no natural power or inclination to accept, even when connected with his highest happiness, is a policy unworthy the bounty of heaven. As revelation shews us the motives adapted to strengthen and improve our virtue, will not God direct the natural powers to the best advantage, if he intends a bounty? Our most familiar ideas of goodness, especially such as the gospel recommends, assure us of it, and we dishonor God by any other supposition. We are all his offspring.

We may also infer the original dignity of natural religion. For what good ends Christians

tians have shaken the foundations of their own religion, by depreciating natural religion, may not be easy to determine ; but if the text is rightly explained, natural religion is still the most excellent religion. This consists in doing the will of God, as our inquiries may make it known to us, and our knowledge of its agreement with our nature confirms us in our affection for it. Neither this law, nor its authority, is weakened by Christianity ; for as Christianity has the same object, it can, at best, but claim to assist us in the knowledge, and confirm us in the practice of it. For to suppose an original law so defective in itself as not to be sufficient to direct us, is to admit, at once, a defect in our constitution, which is as dishonorable to God, as to charge him with changes in the constitution of any other part of nature, because his original laws were not sufficient. Revelation cannot then be admitted but as a part of the original plan, or rather as such a spring as may act in subserviency to the original law, till a variety of causes, wisely fitted to act, may render

der this assistance unnecessary. Christianity is an help to recover the full force of natural law. The Son himself shall then be put under, and God, by perfecting human nature, be all in all.

If this be true, there is not an absolute, but only a relative difference in the condition of men. Natural law is always right, Christianity will assist men to go right. There is nothing beyond our conceptions in this view of Christianity. If God was pleased to constitute us for happy, natural action in the present being, and yet render us capable of future life, but not place the evidence of this future life so certainly in our natural condition as not to admit other evidence, we may not doubt of the benefit, and that he is able to make the evidence appear wise and fit. And when it concurs with natural religion, by our present good, to promote our final good, it may assist some, while it offers no injury to others; and as all things may be in a progressive state, it may, at some future time, be as universal as natural religion itself,

itself. But whatever our opinions of such things may be, we should be careful not so to frame them as to exclude natural law, and injure one of our first and most noble ideas of perfection, an impartial regard to the capacities of creatures which God has created for happiness. However we may magnify our relative advantages, let us leave all men sufficient for wise action ; and if our just and exalted ideas of our own privileges do produce as just and exalted improvements, we are more sure not to be found among those boasting professors, who have said much and done little, and may have our reward in ample glory for doing the will of God.

The practical use of our text should be, to teach us to place religion in those things in which it really consists. However numerous our doctrines, whether simple or mysterious ; whether we receive all the dogmas of the Church or not, let us consider that we should produce good fruits. To have accurate and well defined

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ed sentiments, is not unworthy of our most serious attention. To be distinguished, may be most laudable ambition. But let us not mistake either of them for religion, without regard to our actions. All the orthodoxy in the world will not vindicate a dishonest man. If we believe in supernatural gifts, and that we possess them, let us doubt our religion, if we allow ourselves to violate justice, defame or injure other men. However God may produce his desired regeneration in the mind, let it not have a visionary, but an active operation, that we may shew, out of a good understanding, the works of meekness and love. But all the exercises of instrumental religion are not worth one good deed, and a dishonest act is more than a balance for them all. We cannot be too careful to assist our virtue by the simple institutions of religion; these ought to have been done, and not the other left undone; but we are guilty of heinous iniquity, if we make them a cloke to our vices. Let us then reflect on the various duties of external religion, which we have at-

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tended with such deception. How many solemn sounds without sober thought! how many gracious words and ill actions! how many attempts to deceive by assumed gravity! how many tears in vain! and let us learn to despise such hypocrisy. Let the language of our countenances express the cheerful devotion of our hearts. Let our gravity arise from a just sense of religious truth, and all our actions have an undisputed testimony to our sincerity. The cries, and groans, and complaints of dangerous errors, disturb the weak, the credulous and superstitious. But the single act of injustice speaks louder to a discerning man than all this cant and hypocrisy. When a man is found, who does not profess much, nor despise all, who is pure from guile, peaceable in his life, gentle in his manners, easily dissuaded from revenge, with an heart to pity and relieve the miserable, impartial in his judgement, and without dissimulation, this is the man of religion. This is an apostolic description of a good man; and whatever opinions he may have, he ought to have some, and he has a right to chuse for himself; this man is after God's own heart. The

The candid sentiment of the text demands also a practical effect. The opinions of men belong to God, and the consciences of men are subject to no human tribunal. But wherever they have a virtuous effect, we ought in charity to suppose the favor of God. When the Mahomedan journeys to Mecca, as his acts of self-denial spring from his serious belief, we have no authority to determine in God's stead. But when we see his devotion, his zeal, and the acts of his unfeigned obedience, our affection should teach us with what tenderness the Universal Parent views his creatures innocently erring before him. And we should dismiss all the partialities, which arise from our own particular connections. We should be particularly kind to virtue, wherever we may behold it; and prefer, in this regard, the distant stranger, who practises it, to the child of our bosom, who neglects it. By considering religion in this amiable view, we may increase our love for it, and be induced to consider ourselves, not of small societies only, under the formal obligations of social

social contracts, but as belonging to the household of the faithful, who dwell in every nation, and in every clime, with one God and Father, who hateth nothing that he has made, but loveth and cherisheth it.

While we consider religion in connection with the unnumbered ceremonies of superstition, spread in strange confusion over the earth, we may be inclined to forget the reverence we owe to it, and despise the true excellence and glory of our nature. When we observe how often the various incidents of life tear asunder the mask, and expose the dreadful features concealed under it, we may be induced to curse the religion which assisted the disguise. But when we familiarise the reflection, that true religion is true virtue, and that it is only superstition which lends the false appearance, we shall detest the imposition, not more as an insult to man, than to religion itself. And how happy should we be, if we could attain that Christian perfection, when we may love to appear what

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we are, and yet deserve the character of true Christians. We cannot be too cautious. A form of prayer will easily pass upon us as devotion. We may easily mistake our gifts for divine fervor, and pass on with our neighbours, and be as zealous as they, without the least virtue. Our caution should increase with our danger, and we should remember, that our great obligation is to keep the heart with all diligence, since from that alone are the issues of life.





